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Review of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* by Willa Cather

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Youth and the Bright Medusa. By Willa Cather. Historical essay and explanatory notes by Mark J. Madigan. Textual essay and editing by Frederick M. Link, Charles W. Mignon, Judith Boss, and Kari A. Ronning. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. xii + 613 pp. Illustrations, notes. \$80.00.

The Great Plains launched Willa Cather's career. Her multilayered imagining of frontier folk in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918) placed the region—and the novelist—on the literary map. In 1920, *Youth and the Bright Medusa* combined recent urban stories—"Coming, Aphrodite!," "The Diamond Mine," "A Gold Slipper," "Scandal"—with four stories from 1905's *Troll Garden* anthology—"Paul's Case," "A Wagner Matinée," "The Sculptor's Funeral," and "A Death in the Desert." *Youth and the Bright Medusa* explores dilemmas arising from pursuit of the shining Medusa of art. Can pure art reconcile with commercial acceptance? Will a singer survive her parasitic entourage? Who controls celebrity image? The final three stories add a geographical dimension to artistic tensions as they unflinchingly juxtapose provincial West with cosmopolitan East:

a Nebraska homesteader agonizingly reconnects with Boston's music scene; a deceased sculptor is returned to his barren Kansas hometown; a consumptive diva combats isolation on Wyoming's High Plains. Cather's collection, with its celebration of urban settings and unflattering portrayals of Plains life, seems almost to abandon admiration of western landscapes.

The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* published by the University of Nebraska Press furnishes Cather's stories with a richly complex background that deepens readings of issues such as the author's geographical leanings. Mark J. Madigan's succinctly informative historical essay discusses sources and character prototypes for the eight stories and surveys original publication process and public reception. Numerous photographs and illustrations acquaint readers with places and people associated with the stories while extensive notes explain cultural, historical, geographical, botanical, and biographical phenomena. An essay on textual editing reveals Cather's writing process and details the editing team's painstaking procedure for settling on a critical text. A list of emendations allows readers to reconstruct variants of the stories.

For instance, a passage from the 1903 version of "A Death in the Desert" shows serious art penetrating Cather's western Plains. A dying singer has recreated a New York music studio in Cheyenne. Cather comments: "There are little skeleton-closets of the arts scattered . . . all over the West, where some Might-Have-Been hides his memories and the trophies of his student days on the Continent . . . ; but this room savored of the present, and about it was an air of immediate touch with the art of the present" (582). The Scholarly Edition's textual apparatus divulges that the author takes the singer's gesture sincerely, revealing that Cather's views on region are indeed multifaceted.

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